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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000916

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SUBJECT: REGIME RELEASES 32 POLITICAL PRISONERS

REF: RANGOON 613

Classified By: CDA PRISCILLA A. CLAPP FOR REASON 1.5(D).

1. (SBU) Summary: The regime announced yesterday that it had released 32 political prisoners; 14 NLD members and 18 others, mostly students. The NLD was told of only 24 releases, its 14 members and 10 students the regime said were arrested for supporting NLD activities. Despite the discrepancy in reporting, the NLD hopes these releases presage more significant releases of NLD members and students in conjunction with the upcoming visit of Special Envoy Razali and others. End Summary.

2. (SBU) The regime announced the release of 32 political prisoners yesterday (7/28); 14 NLD members and 18 others. Following its normal procedure, the regime faxed a brief statement from its spokesperson to selected &friendly8 embassies (the U.S. is not among them) and local press representatives. The statement provided just the names of those released and stated that they had been returned to their families from various correctional facilities and were &resting comfortably.8 This was the largest single release of prisoners by the regime since talks with NLD General Secretary Aung San Suu Kyi began in December 1999. None of the 14 NLD prisoners were senior or prominent officials although two were township level leaders before their arrests. Most of the non-NLD prisoners were students who were arrested along with NLD members but were not registered party members.

NLD notified of only 24 releases.....

3. (C) Visiting NLD headquarters to obtain their views on the releases, Poloff was told that NLD Secretary U Lwin had received a call from Military Intelligence (MI) alerting him only to the release of 14 NLD members and 10 students who were arrested with NLD members. MI did not mention the other eight releases which the regime had announced to others. U Lwin did not have any explanation for the discrepancy. (Note: The difference in the method the regime notified the NLD and the press and the differences in the numbers provided is just one example of how carefully the regime continues to attempt to control information. Perhaps the regime did not provide eight of the names to the NLD because the prisoners were not affiliated with the NLD, although their releases were certainly a result of NLD efforts. As usual, however, the regime provided no explanation for its actions. End Note.)

4. (SBU) This discrepancy in numbers aside, U Lwin was pleased with the releases, noting that although no significant NLD leaders were released the number of prisoners released is much higher than the five to ten prisoners the regime has been releasing periodically since the talks began. He said he believes the releases are an effort to demonstrate political progress prior to upcoming visits to Burma by UN Special Envoy Razali (8/2), Japanese Foreign Minister Kawaguchi (8/3), and Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir (8/18).

More releases imminent?

5. (C) This release of 14 NLD members brings the total number of remaining NLD prisoners down to 261, according to U Lwin. He said that he is hopeful that the regime will &clean the slate8 and release the remaining prisoners in conjunction with Special Envoy Razali,s visit. This is a necessary and long overdue action which would pave the way for progress on dialogue, he said.

6. (SBU) U Lwin was also pleased that the regime included student activists in these releases. He said the NLD has no estimate of the number of these activists remaining in prison but there are many. Many of these students, he explained, were arrested for participating in NLD rallies when they were quite young and had little understanding of the consequences of their actions. Some who are still in prison were arrested as long ago as 1989, according to U Lwin. He and Vice Chairman U Tin Oo expressed hope that yesterday,s releases are a harbinger of more student releases in the near future.

7. (SBU) Discussing the total number of remaining political prisoners, U Lwin said the NLD does not know how many non-NLD

ethnic political prisoners exist in addition to the student activists. He said the number of Karen, Shan, and other ethnic political prisoners could be substantial, especially near the border areas. (Note: This explains in part at least the continuing inconsistent estimates of political prisoners by Amnesty International, ICRC, and others. End Note.)

Clapp